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Wassily Kandinsky and the Expression of War: The Zyrians, Theosophy, and Pre-War Germany

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Wassily Kandinsky and the Expression of War: The Zyrians, Theosophy, and Pre-War Germany

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Art History Honors Thesis
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ABSTRACT

Kandinsky is known for his colorful but complex abstract works. I am interested in the development of his abstraction up until World War One and how his experiences in Russia and Munich influenced his first abstract paintings. Specifically, I want to explore how the tensions in Europe preceding the war manifested in three works: *Angel of the Last Judgment* (1911), *Black Spot* (1912), and *Improvisation (Deluge)* (1913). Through research of Kandinsky's life in Russia before becoming an artist, Theosophical thought in Russia's Silver Age, the relationship between Russia and Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century, and a close analysis of his philosophy of colors and forms (by looking at his books, *On the Spiritual in Art* and *Point and Line to Plane*), I developed an argument for the three paintings. I will argue how key experiences and influences in his life led him to develop a specific abstract oeuvre in which he depicts his emotions and thoughts through color and form that is most apparent in the years before World War One. Kandinsky used Russian folk imagery in combination with Theosophical themes to abstractly express the heightened anxiety in Germany before the war.

"The world was thus materially changed through and in accordance with the artist's vision of harmony, as the artist himself had been. By the same token, the artist's life was not separable from the art that was both to reflect and further transform it. It was the raw, chaotic material on which art worked. As one historian of the movement has put it, 'the events of the life were never experienced as merely and solely life's events. The events of life immediately became a part of the internal world, a piece of creation.'"¹

I. INTRODUCTION

Wassily Kandinsky's first abstract painting debuted in the years before the start of World War One in 1914. As a Russian living in Germany during these pre-war years he, and his cohort of painters, felt the tension heighten as the destruction neared. This anxiety, combined with the cultural knowledge gained from years living in Russia and Germany, led to highly charged paintings with embedded war symbolism and philosophy between 1911 and 1914.

The first cultural event this thesis will focus on is Kandinsky's trip to northern Russia during his years studying law. He embarked on this journey aiming to report on remaining folk religious beliefs of the Zyrians. After centuries of Christianization, he found that the Zyrians still held on to certain beliefs, especially those of spirits that dwelled in the home, on the agricultural field, and in the sky. The only way to reach spirits was through the shaman, who would have an out of body experience in order to reach the spiritual world. The law student-turned-artist became inspired by the pictographs on the shaman's drums and soon began to create his own oeuvre of symbols derived from Zyrian culture.

The second event to influence Kandinsky's pre-war art is the introduction of Theosophy in Russia. The study of theosophy goes back centuries but was revived by Helena Blavatsky in the 19th century. This woman traveled the world picking up and spreading ideas of spirituality,

¹ Izenberg, Gerald N. "Wassily Kandinsky and the Origins of Abstraction." *Modernism and Masculinity: Mann, Wedekind, Kandinsky through World War I*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000. 171.

Buddhism, symbolism, and exoticism, among many other worldly thoughts, that would attract the educated elite of Russia and Europe. Kandinsky, being a part of intellectual circles, was aware of this movement and began to incorporate Theosophical ideas into his art. He was especially drawn to the darker side of Theosophy that included the realm of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Around the turn of the century the movement started to incorporate apocalyptic themes into its doctrine as Russia and Europe began to spiral into unease. As the war neared, tension heightened and more artists began to sense inevitable destruction approaching. Many works of art by several artists from the years just before the war have apocalyptic themes of chaos, death, and uncertainty. A number of these works, however, contain images of hope. Theosophy supported the belief in a coming apocalypse but the movement also emphasized reincarnation and rebirth. Based on this doctrine, hope was possible only after destruction. This would be a common motif for Kandinsky's pre-war paintings.

Building off his experiences with Zyrian and Theosophical spirituality, Kandinsky became aware of the psychological effect of colors. He noticed yellows had a quality of insanity, blues were intrinsically calm, blacks often represent death, and whites are a symbol for purity. In addition, forms and lines have an effect on the viewer as well. Sharp triangles evoke pain while circles are softer and horizontal lines are calmer than dynamic diagonals. Kandinsky used combinations of colors and shapes to help express his thoughts on the coming war.

Many historians have written on Kandinsky's path to abstraction. Art historian and critic Richard Cork sees a number of his pre-war paintings as apocalyptic, containing images of the Last Judgment or deluge.² Peg Weiss, an art historian and scholar on German Expressionism, argues in her book, *Kandinsky and Old Russia*, the influence of Kandinsky's ethnographic trip as

² Cork, Richard. *A Bitter Truth: Avant-Garde Art and the Great War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994. 17-18.

a “fundamental key” to his body of work. She challenges the artist’s early assertion that the viewer cannot and has no need to read the content of his paintings by claiming “events of the times triggered the production of paintings with quite specific imagery.”³ She also gives examples of shaman pictography that influenced Kandinsky’s development of symbolism. Rose-Carol Washton Long, a professor interested in the historical visual culture of Germany and Russia and the connection between art and politics, discusses Kandinsky’s relationship between anarchy and abstraction. She claims he struggled with rejecting representational imagery that related to materialistic values in favor of abstraction that lacked the ability to communicate to an audience.⁴ She also touches on Kandinsky’s use of folk images and his relationship to Theosophy and the apocalypse.⁵ In this thesis, I will take the side of these three historians and relate their fields of war, folk culture, and politics to each other.

The events in Kandinsky’s life leading up to World War One were all important in the development of his abstract and highly emotional pre-war paintings. His ethnographic studies of Zyrian culture created the foundation for the growth of his abstract imagery under the influence of Theosophy. Further, Zyrian and Theosophical imagery were the base for the artist to start expressing emotions, especially those of the highly stressed environment building up until the outbreak of the war. Finally, his psychological interpretation of colors and forms aided his expression of emotions on canvas; this guides my reading of three of his paintings, *Angel of the Last Judgment*, *Black Spot*, and *Improvisation (Deluge)*.

³ Weiss, Peg. *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. xiii-xv.

⁴ Long, Rose-Carol Washton. *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980. vi.

⁵ Long, Rose-Carol Washton. "Occultism, Anarchism, and Abstraction: Kandinsky’s Art of the Future." *Art Journal*. 46.1 (1987): 38-45.

II. RUSSIAN STUDIES OF FOLK CULTURE AND THEOSOPHY

Ethnography and the Zyrians

Wassily Kandinsky was born in Moscow on December 4, 1866. His heritage came from various Asian and European localities. His father, Wassily Silvestrovich Kandinsky, was originally from the east, born in Kyakhta, near the Russia-Mongolia border. His father's ancestors had settled in the east after being banished from western Siberia. Although Kandinsky saw his mother frequently after she divorced Kandinsky senior, his father's ideas influenced his childhood and the rest of his life. The "inherited liberalism" from his father, a director of a tea shipping company and part of the progressive middle class, led Kandinsky to become a Russian professional and an academic.⁶ In 1885 he enrolled as a law and economics student at the University of Moscow to study Roman law, criminal law, the history of Russian Law, and finally peasant law and ethnography.⁷ A few years into his academic career, sponsored by the Ethnographic Society, Kandinsky spent several weeks in June and July 1889 in the Vologda province in northern Russia studying peasant law and pagan religion.⁸ The goal of his study was to discover any remaining practices of pagan folk beliefs despite centuries of Christianization.⁹

This trip may have partially been an attempt for Kandinsky to find his ethnic roots and his identity at the base of the Ural Mountains near western Siberia.¹⁰ In addition to establishing a

⁶ Izenberg. "Origins of Abstraction." 173. See also McKay, Carol. "Modernist Primitivism?: The Case of Kandinsky." *Oxford Art Journal*. 16.2 (1993): 21-36. McKay defines the upper and middle-class intellectuals, of which Kandinsky and his father are a part, as "metropolitan educated and with increasingly close acquaintance with Western-style educational and social currents."

⁷ Hoberg. "Chronology." 284. See also Weiss 2.

⁸ Hoberg, Annegret. "Vasily Kandinsky: Abstract. Absolute. Concrete." *Kandinsky*. Comp. Tracy Bashkoff and Comp. Annegret Hoberg. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009. 24.

⁹ McKay, Carol. "Kandinsky's ethnography: Scientific field work and aesthetic reflection." *Art History*. 17.2 (1994): 182.

¹⁰ Jääts, Indrek. "The Komi, Ethnic Stereotypes, and Nationalities Policy in Late Imperial Russia." *Russian Review*. 68. (2009): 201-202. Many other scholars were interested in old folk traditions because they thought these primitive societies could provide a history of their own modernized societies. Intellectuals viewed folk cultures as a low social class who were uncivilized and barbaric.

connection with his father's heritage, Kandinsky may have been interested in discovering origins of his name in northern Russia. The name "Kandinsky" could have originated in the cultures of the people in Vologda. The Zyrian people and their neighbors traveled for centuries along the Ob River to trade. One settlement along the river was called Kondinsk (or Kandinsk) and similarly, a river off the Ob was called the Konda. An idol in the region also had the name "kondinskii", named after the Konda River. Therefore Kandinsky may not only have been drawn to Vologda because of his studies in ethnography, but also to answer genealogical questions associated with this land.¹¹ He no doubt felt a connection to the region and to the Zyrian people during his expedition and left inspired by their beliefs on spirituality and religion.¹²

An artist at heart, Kandinsky constantly illustrated the lives of the people he encountered. He filled his diary with sketches of the landscape, clothing, architecture, and icons of Vologda. The knowledge he gained from his ethnographic studies abroad stayed with him once he left a law career to pursue art.

Kandinsky's journey culminated in a published article. In this writing he emphasized the Zyrian beliefs associated with death, especially the *ort* or "soul form" that appeared as a

¹¹ Weiss 8.

¹² Paulson, Ivar. "Outline of Permian Folk Religion." *Journal of the Folklore Institute*. 2.2 (1965): 150-173. The Zyrians were decedents of Bronze Age Permian people of northern Russia. In the late 14th century, after coming under Russian influence a few centuries earlier, the Zyrian people came into contact with the Russian Orthodox Church. The different groups of peoples in Northern Russia were converted to Christianity to varying degrees over the next several hundred years of attempted Christianization. The Zyrians, though influenced by the church, still held on to old folk beliefs. One important belief common to all the region's peoples was the Heaven God who they worshiped in order for the land to be fertilized. This formed a strong connection between heaven and the earth. Also connected with agriculture were the "Earth Luck" deity that brought fertility to the fields and the "noon goddess" who punished anyone who destroyed the rye while in bloom. The forest, an important source for wood and wild game, and water both had spirits that protected the animals living in their environment and both received offerings and sacrifices from the Zyrian people. In addition, the home had a spirit that could help the family but also presented a bad omen when seen. These old folk beliefs show that the Zyrians made strong connections between the earth, the people, and heaven or the spirit world.

deceased person before and after their death.¹³ He clarified that the *ort* is not the same as “spirit” in Christian terms; however, because of Christianization the Zyrians had an unclear understanding of spirits and the human soul.¹⁴ Nonetheless, they held on to beliefs of old folk culture in everyday life, worshipping spirits that protected the forest, water, and homes which emphasized a strong relationship between living things and an unseen spirit world.

Images of Russian folklore inspired by the Zyrians can be seen in many of Kandinsky's very early twentieth century paintings such as *Twilight* from 1901 and *Russian Beauty in a Landscape* from 1904 (Figure 1). He filled the 1904 painting with symbols and representational images of Russian folklore and culture. In the painting, a woman in an elaborate Russian dress

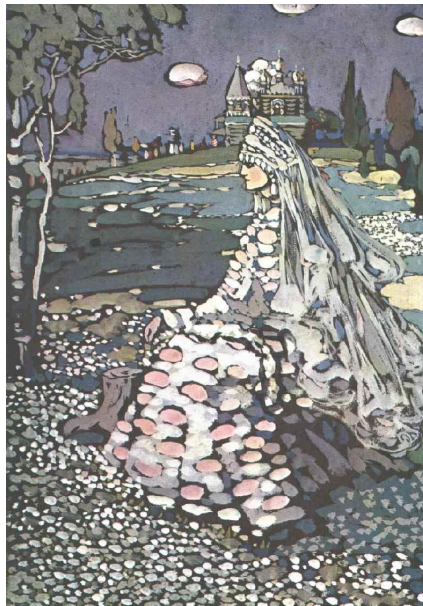


Figure 1: Kandinsky. *Russian Beauty in a Landscape*, 1904.

¹³ Weiss 23.

¹⁴ McKay. "Kandinsky's ethnography." 191.

sits in a meadow dotted with flowers; to her right is a birch tree and in the background is a church. In Russian folklore, the birch is a symbol for love and marriage.¹⁵ *Twilight*, a small tempera painting, depicts a knight on a horse galloping towards the center of the composition. The nighttime landscape around the horse and rider consists of dark fir trees lit by the moon and a single flower standing out from the background. This painting recalls the Zyrian spirit of the rye in the blooming flower and the artist himself in the rider. The images are not only symbols from Russian folklore but also reference Kandinsky's feelings toward the convergence of Christianity and the pagan beliefs of the Zyrians. Art historian Peg Weiss gives a cautious explanation:

The impending collision between knight and flower suggests a symbolic encounter between Christianity and pagan belief, a reference to the phenomenon of “double faith,” or dvoeverie. Moreover, the Russian name for cornflower, vasilëk, suggests that here Kandinsky adopted a hidden signature. If this picture is indeed so self-referential, then certainly the charging rider on the white horse already hints at the artist's self-identification with the image of Egori the Brave, uniting within himself both pagan and Christian attributes.¹⁶

Twilight is an early example of the artist embedding spirituality, in this case religious, and emotion in his colors and forms that will emerge later in his more abstract paintings in Munich, especially in those before the outbreak of The Great War.

Kandinsky also drew inspiration from Siberian shamans in his later Munich works. In Russian folk culture, the shaman was the mediator between humans and the spirits whose services included healing the sick, solving clan problems, foretelling the future, and safely turning over the dead to their own realm.¹⁷ In order to reach the gods, shamans used their drums to leave their body and travel to other worlds. Kandinsky was thought to have shamanistic

¹⁵ Weiss 36.

¹⁶ Weiss 35.

¹⁷ Weiss 72.

experiences through the act of drawing that elevated him “out of time and space” and into an “ecstasy.”¹⁸ He reflected,

The artist is perhaps in a position, albeit only partially and by chance – to summon up within himself these states of inspiration by artificial means. Moreover, he can qualify the nature of those states which arise within him of their own volition. All the experience and knowledge that relate to this area are but one of the elements of ‘consciousness.’¹⁹

He knew artists were capable of reaching a higher, more spiritual state through the act of making art. Kandinsky’s belief in spirituality that guided his use of abstraction and led to the ideas in his 1912 book, *On the Spiritual in Art*, was in part fueled by his experience with northern Russia shamanism. The meaning behind his abstractions possibly came from a spiritual subconsciousness that the artist may or may not have been aware of. Furthermore, he based his development of symbols in his abstract works on shamanism. Shamans used drums illustrated with pictographs in their ceremonies. Kandinsky reinvented these symbols in his paintings by representing objects such as the sun or ideas such as death with little more than splashes of color and simple forms.²⁰ For example, he derived his horse motif almost exclusively from pictographs on shaman drums. While shamans depicted horses as a curved line with four stick legs (Figure

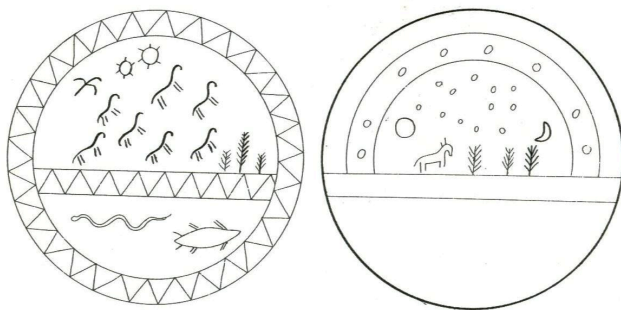


Figure 2: Diagram of northern Russia shaman drums with horses. From Weiss 82.

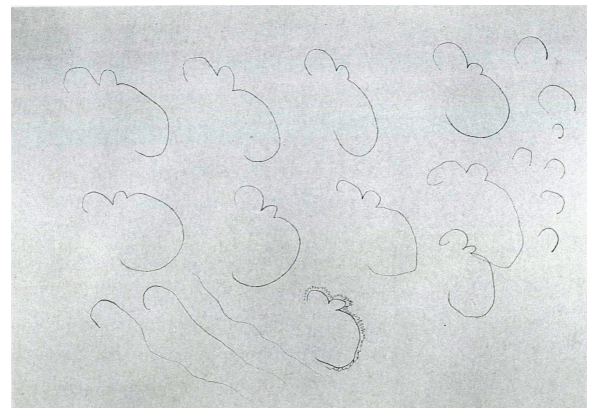


Figure 3: Kandinsky’s sketches for the horse and rider motif, ca 1912-1913. From Weiss 89.

¹⁸ Weiss 76-77.

¹⁹ Weiss 9.

²⁰ Weiss 81-90.

2), Kandinsky took their image further by eliminating the legs and making the curve more pronounced (Figure 3). Soon, the horse came to be represented only by a circle.²¹ Another example of the influence of Russian folk art on Kandinsky is the cover for *Der Blaue Reiter* almanac. He took a folk motif of St. George and transformed it into a stylized but recognizable image.²² Zyrian shamanism directly influenced many other motifs as well: suns became circles emitting streaks, boats became pods with angled lines for oars, and mountains became triangles.²³

Blavatsky, Nietzsche, and the Theosophical Movement

From his in depth studies of Russian native culture, Kandinsky began to synthesize his own ideas of spirituality. These ideas were further influenced by the contemporary philosophies of Madame Blavatsky and Friedrich Nietzsche. By the time the artist left Russia, he had a full background of native pagan and Christian beliefs, shamanism and the use of symbolism, as well as Theosophical imagery that would influence his abstract motifs for decades to come.

The ideas circulating during the Russian Silver Age, between 1890 and 1914, also influenced Kandinsky's thought and therefore his art. Though prevalent in many ancient societies, occultism emerged in *fin de siècle* Russia and brought with it Theosophy and spiritualism.²⁴ Helena Blavatsky, an expatriate Russian, created Theosophy as a "syncretic, mystico-religious philosophical system" that would "resolve the 'crisis of culture and

²¹ Weiss 87-88.

²² Rose-Carol Washton Long. "Kandinsky's Abstract Style: The Veiling of Apocalyptic Folk Imagery." *Art Journal*. 34.3 (1975): 220.

²³ Weiss 87.

²⁴ Carlson, Maria. "*No religion higher than truth*": *A history of the theosophical movement in Russia, 1875-1922*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993. 29. "Theosophy (with a small 't') as speculative mysticism should be distinguished from Theosophy (with a capital 'T') as an organized movement of the late nineteenth century." I will primarily reference the movement and Blavatsky's influence during Kandinsky's life by using the capital "T" instead of the general lower case "t" that could reference any theosophical idea going back to as early as the 3rd century AD.

consciousness.”²⁵ The Russian intellectuals, a group in which Kandinsky was a member, flocked to Theosophy and the dark realm of Nietzsche to escape the reality of social unrest. They took Theosophy seriously as either a dialogue on culture or a part of society’s interest in Eastern religions.²⁶ The doctrine upheld spiritual values and aesthetics that its elite members aimed to identify with art and religion.²⁷ The result was inner enlightenment and a renaissance of the arts, religion, and idealist philosophy.²⁸ Spirituality flourished under Theosophical thought and Kandinsky, with his background in Russian ethnography, embraced Blavatsky’s doctrine.²⁹

Blavatsky had traveled the world, including Russia, India, Egypt, and the United States, in search of spiritualism. Theosophy as a whole was not her invention but she did claim she was the “reviver of a creed that had slumbered in the Orient for centuries, and declared herself to be a messenger of the mahatmas to the scoffing world.”³⁰ Although she also may not have founded the Theosophical Society in New York,³¹ she exploited it for the distribution of ideas on Indian spirituality.³² One definition of Theosophy’s core values comes from Maurice Tuchman, the curator of modern art at the Los Angeles County Museum, in a catalog for an exhibition of abstract painting, stating that Theosophy

²⁵ Carlson 6.

²⁶ Carlson 159.

²⁷ Carlson 7.

²⁸ Kandinsky, Wassily. *On the Spiritual in Art*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946. 25-26.

²⁹ Theosophy influenced many other artists besides Kandinsky near the turn of the century. Paul Sérusier sought a higher truth based on Theosophical thought throughout his life (Davenport, Nancy. "Paul Sérusier: Art and Theosophy." *Religion and the Arts*. 11. (2007): 172-213.). Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, and Paul Klee all included concepts of Theosophy in their art though they may not have identified Theosophy as a source of inspiration (King, Mike. "Concerning the Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art and Science." *Leonardo*. 31.1 (1998): 21-31.). In addition, the Russian artists Alexej von Jawlensky and Marianne von Werefkin had contact with the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner who wrote about Theosophical ideas (Long. *The Development of an Abstract Style*. 27.).

³⁰ Evans, Henry Ridgely. "Madame Blavatsky." *Monist*. 14.3 (1904): 396-397.

³¹ Some sources do claim she was the founder of the modern Theosophical Society (see Long. "Occultism, Anarchism, and Abstraction." 38.)

³² Evans 393-398.

denotes metaphysical teachings and systems, derived from personal experience and esoteric tradition, which base knowledge of nature and the human condition upon knowledge of the divine nature or spiritual powers. The primary aim of theosophical teaching, which may seem highly speculative, is not to advance the theoretical understanding of nature, but to enhance awareness of the relationships between nature and spirit, and thus to enable the individual to active direct, intuitive knowledge (wisdom) and personal experience of the spiritual.³³

Theosophy's emblem, two interlocked triangles that form a six-pointed star, reinforces the connection between the spiritual and material realms that Kandinsky alluded to in some of his paintings. The white triangle pointing up references the spirit and light while the downward triangle in black and references matter. Sometimes circles accompany the triangles to represent the reoccurring cycles of reincarnation.³⁴

The University of Moscow environment provided Kandinsky with a spirituality and rejection of materialism and positivism that was fueled by the teachings of his professors, including Sergei Bulgakov and Alexander Chuprov.³⁵ Bulgakov was a Russian intellectual and priest whose ideas frequently overlapped with those of Theosophy, though he was not a theosophist.³⁶ Chuprov perhaps influenced Kandinsky to spend time in Moscow and Northern Russia for his studies. Vladimir Solov'ev and Dmitry Merezhkovsky also influenced Kandinsky in Russia.³⁷ Solov'ev, a Russian religious philosopher, acknowledged Theosophy's importance but found flaws in the theories and morals of the movement.³⁸ He recognized but ultimately misread Nietzsche's core idea of the *Übermensch*, or beyond human, in his writings. A historian of philosophy, Frederick Copleston, characterized Nietzsche's higher man by:

physical vigour and strength... with intellectual power, independence of soul, artistic perception and appreciation, psychological insight. Nietzsche lays great stress on

³³ Davenport 172-173. See also Tuchman, Maurice. *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. Catalog of exhibition. Los Angeles County Museum. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986.

³⁴ Davenport 173.

³⁵ Hoberg. "Abstract. Absolute. Concrete." 23-24.

³⁶ Carlson 160.

³⁷ Hoberg. "Abstract. Absolute. Concrete." 24.

³⁸ Carlson 160.

nobility, independence, truthfulness, and un-wavering courage: moreover, he makes it quite clear that the higher man has command over himself, is slave to no passion or lust, although he in no way despises the body or practises asceticism from other-worldly motives. The higher man emancipates himself from morality, from the code of ethics asserted by the herd, and is a creator of values.³⁹

Furthermore, Nietzsche contends this higher man is a man of the future, a highly developed product of the current man.⁴⁰ Solov'ev had imagined his own transcendent man, before he encountered Nietzsche's version, as an ideal, perfected human related to the figure of Christ. He interpreted the *Übermensch* in the same religious way as his own, despite Nietzsche's atheist approach stating there is no perfectibility of man and therefore the super man can only be something beyond human. When Solov'ev traveled Europe and Russia near the turn of the century he saw a decline of traditional Christian values partially due to avant-garde movements and Nietzschean thought. Solov'ev struggled with Nietzsche's philosophies but in the end related the *Übermensch* to the Antichrist, creating an apocalyptic vision, in line with theosophical thought.⁴¹ Merezhkovsky also understood the importance of Theosophy as an intellectual movement, but eventually rejected it because of the conflicts with Christianity.⁴² Nevertheless, Kandinsky came into contact with these ideas in one way or another through these prominent professors, writers, and philosophers in Russia and they influenced his ideas of spirituality and inner values.

Kandinsky believed Theosophy's occult claims justified an art movement of non-representational painting.⁴³ These spiritual and philosophical ideas emphasized harmony, reincarnation, silver and white, the abyss, the bright and the silent, circles, wheels, spirals, and a

³⁹ Copleston, F. C. "Friedrich Nietzsche." *Philosophy*. 17.67 (1942): 234-235.

⁴⁰ Copleston 239-240

⁴¹ Grillaert, Nel. "A Short Story About The *Übermensch*: Vladimir Solov'ev's Interpretation of and Response to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*." *Studies in East European Thought*. 55.2 (2003): 162-175.

⁴² Carlson 163.

⁴³ Pickstone, Charles. "The Sacred Beyond the Walls." *ACE Bulletin*. Mar 2002: 12.

struggle between light and dark, among other occult imagery.⁴⁴ Kandinsky often depicted battles between lightness and darkness with vast and ominous areas of deep color and large areas of bright white. Deep colors such as dark blue or red and black signify an abyss while bright areas of white or light yellow are silent with the promise of regeneration or rebirth.⁴⁵ Many of his paintings also include circles in some form, whether an oval or part of a curve, which may also reference reincarnation, a core value of Theosophy, similar to Buddhist thought.⁴⁶ Kandinsky's depictions of these motifs may have been directly influenced by Theosophy as he, and other artists, "felt that Theosophy helped them to enhance the spiritual and intellectual content of their painting."⁴⁷

Drawing from his ethnographic studies and the prevalent ideas of the country's Silver Age, Kandinsky was able to perfect his spiritual artistic style and embrace abstraction in Munich. Because of his Russian background, he was able to "transform imagery beyond the materialistic present, in which so many precedents remained mired, into a universal lyrical mode" that "raised his oeuvre to another level."⁴⁸ He did this by abstraction of ideas into colors and forms and became a true artist of the time, as historian Gerald Izenberg claims, "the Nietzschean overman, limited by the body but spiritually unbounded."⁴⁹ Kandinsky flourished by using his art to transcend humanity and enter into the spiritual realm.

⁴⁴ Carlson 9-10.

⁴⁵ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 64-68.

⁴⁶ Carlson 29.

⁴⁷ Carlson 159.

⁴⁸ Weiss 47.

⁴⁹ Izenberg. "Origins of Abstraction." 170.

III. THE RUSSIAN ARTIST LIVING IN GERMANY

In 1896, after viewing Monet's haystacks at an exhibition, Kandinsky made the decision to leave Russia and pursue an art career in Germany. He recalled:

The picture not only worked, but penetrated indelibly into my memory and continued to float in my mind's eye quite unexpectedly to the last detail.... But what was completely clear to me – was the unsuspected power of the palette, previously hidden from me, that exceeded all my dreams. Painting acquired a fairy-tale power and splendor... the object as an unavoidable element of the picture was discredited.... I had the impression that a small part of my fairy-tale Moscow already existed on the canvas.⁵⁰

Monet painted his series of haystacks between 1884 and 1893 as an attempt to show a moment in time. He used small, quick brushstrokes and various colors to show how the sun lit the scene.

The haystacks, however, were not the subject; Monet focused on color and form instead and Kandinsky realized when he viewed this exhibition that a painting did not need a clear subject.

The palette, made of color and form, became the important quality of his haystacks.⁵¹

Following Monet's impressionist example of small, colorful brushstrokes imitating but not representing life, Kandinsky set out on a path towards abstraction.

In Germany, Kandinsky enrolled in the private academy of Anton Azhbe where he joined many other Russian artists including Marianne von Werefkin and Alexej von Jawlensky.⁵²

Munich was a center for art in Europe and was especially popular for Russians seeking to abandon the oppressed realist style of the anti-tsarist secessionists and the government back in Russia. The *Peredvizhniki* were a realist, anti-tsarist artist group founded in St. Petersburg whose goal was to show the government the injustices suffered by the Russian people through images of hunger and poverty. The society broke down after associating with the Imperial Academy of Art in 1890, and their realist style became the preferred visual language of the

⁵⁰ Weiss 34.

⁵¹ Seitz, William. "Monet and Abstract Painting." *College Art Journal*. 16.1 (1956): 39-41.

⁵² Hoberg. "Abstract. Absolute. Concrete." 25.

government. The country had lost a “progressive artistic ideological opposition” with the disappearance of the *Peredvizhniki*. Realism no longer stood for the plight of the Russian people as it “became sanitized, reduced to softhearted genre images of peasants tilling wheat fields.”⁵³ In contrast, in Germany the Munich Secession, founded in 1892, welcomed international artists in order to promote progress and innovation in art.⁵⁴

The Russians had a unique place in Munich’s expanding art community because of their visualization of the internal realm and high emotional content. German art critics continually praised the Russian artists for their break from the conventional academic and official art characterized by dull colors, tonality, defined figures, and continuous lines in favor of brighter colors and a freedom of form. One anonymous critic stated “Nature and mankind are infused here with a spiritual meaning; we don’t see mere Slavic copies, no photographs, rather animated and highly spirited representations from nature and the life of the people.”⁵⁵

Though admired by critics and artists alike, the Russians in Germany felt a constant pressure from the German government and community because of a fear of Russian anarchist uprising. Although many avant-garde artists were not politically active or connected to anarchist activities, independent scholar Adrienne Kochman claims, “The avant-garde’s tendency to side with leftist politics and their opposition to government-run academic institutions opened the possibility that local Munich artists might pursue an active anarchist agenda in the future.”⁵⁶ Open anarchists such as the painters Camille Pissarro and Paul Signac and the increasing interest in anarchy in Germany gave the government reason for alarm. The Munich police constantly

⁵³ Kochman, Adrienne. "Russian émigré artists and political opposition in fin-de-siècle Munich." *Emporia State Research Studies*. 45.1 (2009): 7-8.

⁵⁴ Has-Ellison, J. Trygve. "Nobles, Modernism, and the Culture of Fin-De-Siècle Munich." *German History*. 26.1 (2008): 7-12.

⁵⁵ Kochman 9.

⁵⁶ Kochman 12.

spied on the Russian immigrant artists in search of any who were politically active so they could be arrested and sent back to Russia. Although he was frequently travelling during much of the period between 1900 and 1910, Kandinsky was among the Russian artists who became frustrated with the German perception of Russians.⁵⁷ During the height of the Russian Revolution in 1905 he said, “One of the greatest evils of our time is the press, which is allowed to spit in anyone’s face without ever being wrong” and he later commented on the negative stereotyping of Russians as “‘unruly’, if not barbaric.”⁵⁸

Tensions between Russian immigrants and Germans subsided slightly in 1908, when Kandinsky and other artists returned to Munich. The German government still did not allow Russian political activity of any kind, but in exchange for avoiding political content in their works, Russian artists could at least pursue art more liberally. Personal images were the most tolerated; the more personal the image, the less it would be able to threaten the power structure and induce political action.⁵⁹

Abstraction as a visualization of the internal realm seemed to be a personal rather than political subject matter; therefore it was unsuspicious to the German government. Kandinsky pushed this artistic freedom to visualize emotions in his highly abstracted works. Kochman states that he began to

veil his images by disallowing the traditional viewer’s expectation that what she/he was seeing was literally depicted. One simply could no longer be sure. Initiated in 1908, specific objects - trees, horses and buildings for example - were hidden as abstracted elements in a painting, often by placing the object where it would not be expected or simplifying its form by rendering it only in partial outline.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Hoberg. "Chronology." 286-289. Kandinsky spent time between 1903 and 1908 in Vienna, Odessa, Moscow, Berlin, Amsterdam, Arnhem, Rotterdam, Paris, Tunisia, Rome, Florence, Dresden, Switzerland, Hungary, Ukraine, Cologne, Brussels, Milan, Rapallo, Angers, the South Tirol region in Italy, and other cities with brief stops back in Munich throughout the years.

⁵⁸ Kochman 12-15.

⁵⁹ Kochman 15.

⁶⁰ Kochman 16.

Kandinsky and Franz Marc's affinity towards abstraction led them to form *Der Blaue Reiter* in 1911. This artist group embraced diversity among artists unlike the NKVM (The New Artists Association) group, which they had been part of since 1909. The artists distanced themselves from realism partly due to the limitations of political associations of naturalism.⁶¹ Kandinsky, Marc, Gabriele Münter and the other avant-garde artists in *Der Blaue Reiter* were free to push abstraction to great lengths.

Although the artists could find some peace in experimenting with styles, Europe was highly unstable in the years leading up to the war, as art historian Yule Heibel explains:

Impending war announced itself several times prior to its actual outbreak. In response to this, radical intellectuals, writers and avant-garde artists attempted to articulate a critique of the society they lived in – a critique that in some Expressionist circles strongly identified with the apocalyptic temper of bourgeois dissolution.⁶²

Germany experienced two Moroccan crises in 1911 due to fighting over territory in Africa with France, almost causing the start of a serious war. To add to the tension, most intellectuals in Germany, including artists like Kandinsky, controversially favored anarchism instead of Social Democracy.⁶³ Kandinsky made his political thoughts known not through representational art but through a chapter in his book *On the Spiritual in Art*.⁶⁴ He describes a triangle of society in which the bottom portion is filled with the ordinary Social Democrats who have no revolutionary drive because they are ignorant of the ideas behind revolution. The intellectuals hold the next section and also lack the ability to create action because they are afraid of the already fast

⁶¹ Kochman 17-18.

⁶² Heibel, Yule F. "They danced on volcanoes": Kandinsky's breakthrough to abstraction, the German avant-garde and the eve of the First World War." *Art History*. 12.3 (1989): 349.

⁶³ Heibel 350-352.

⁶⁴ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 21-22.

moving political system. Finally, at the top reside men with no fear of chaos,⁶⁵ unlike the middle group. Kandinsky was part of the middle of his triangle and was therefore frustrated with the fear that caused the lack of expressing anarchist freedom. Although he may have supported anarchy, he and his fellow Munich artists were not politically active. He nonetheless had to hide his support of a revolution behind abstraction.

Though barred from expressing any political motivations in his art, Kandinsky and other artists showed their frustrations abstractly. His focus shifted from representational expressionism toward abstracted form and color. His paintings became illegible to those who were not let in on the meaning of his symbols.⁶⁶ Zyrian shamanism influenced at least part of his repertoire of pictographs including symbols for horses, suns, boats, mountains, and more.⁶⁷ Theosophy also aided in expressing mystical concepts such as the abyss and apocalypse.⁶⁸ His hidden support of anarchist revolution that advocated a transformation of values in society coincided with the Theosophical idea of a regeneration and rebirth of Europe.⁶⁹ Kandinsky could draw on his experiences of shamanism and, fueled by the political unrest in Germany and the teachings of Blavatsky and Nietzsche, developed abstract works that expressed his dissatisfaction with the world around him.

⁶⁵ Babich, Babette E. "Nietzsche's Chaos Sive Natura: Evening Gold and the Dancing Star." *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*. 57.2 (2001): 225-227. Kandinsky may be referencing Nietzsche's view on chaos here. The philosopher's chaos corresponds with creative potency and equates to nature, art, and the will to power.

⁶⁶ Heibel 353-355.

⁶⁷ Weiss 87.

⁶⁸ Stavrinaki, Maria. "Messianic Pains. The Apocalyptic Temporality in Avant-Garde Art, Politics, and War." *Modernism/modernity*. 18.2 (2011): 372-373. Stavrinaki outlines the mystical concept of the apocalypse as a development of artists before WWI. Many artists such as Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and other avant-gardes did not focus on the humanity of war but instead on the spiritual side in the realm of abstraction. The artists viewed the war as either a transcendental experience or a way to "accelerate the manifestation of the sacred." War became less rational as it took the place of religious sacrifice and in this way became mystical according to intellectuals and artists. This viewpoint of a mystical war cannot be separated from the notion of the apocalypse, which "corresponds to a polyvalent metaphor; it is a complex construction, interlocking aesthetics, politics and religiosity, the subjective and voluntarist quest for religion in modern times. Since this notion determined artistic ideologies before the war, the avant-gardes were ready to invest in the idea of an 'apocalyptic war.'"

⁶⁹ Long. "Occultism, Anarchism, and Abstraction." 43.

IV. ANALYSIS OF THREE PRE-WAR PAINTINGS

Despite the increased artistic freedom he found in abstraction and the lessened strain in Germany on Russian immigrants, tension stayed with Kandinsky in the few years leading up to the Great War. His paintings became increasingly chaotic and dominated by ominous black shapes. For example, *Romantic Landscape* (1911, Figure 4) has many abstracted forms but the focus is on the black amorphous shape on the right side, coming out of the lighter white background. *Lady in Moscow* (1912, Figure 5) also has a black spot. This black is more out of place than the previous painting because it floats in a scene of a woman standing next to a table on the street of a city. The painting has many bright colors that stand in sharp contrast to the black shape.



Figure 4: Kandinsky. *Romantic Landscape*, 1911.



Figure 5: Kandinsky. *Lady in Moscow*, 1912.

The titles Kandinsky gives to his paintings reflect anxiety. Some examples include *Hound of Hell and Bird of Paradise* (1911), *Rider of the Apocalypse* (1911), *The Last Judgment* (1912), and *Fugue* (1914). All these titles refer to an end of existence through a disaster, such as the apocalypse. *Fugue* describes not only a musical form but also a subconscious or altered conscious state in which a person has little control over their actions. Kandinsky chose the titles

of his paintings to refer to events, though not specific events, even when his paintings contain no representational imagery. Some works do contain recognizable objects, however. One such painting is *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)* from 1913 (Figure 6) where two or three cannons sit at the bottom left corner, pointing towards the center of the composition with rounded clouds of smoke propelling out of the barrels.⁷⁰

Drawing from his experiences with Zyrian spirituality and the Theosophical movement, Kandinsky developed an artistic form that tapped into his deep emotions and thoughts. He felt frustrated because of the conflicts between Germans and Russians in Munich, and additionally, the imminent war was approaching fast. Many artists felt the pre-war tension, as art historian Richard Cork explains,

Throughout Europe, some of the most alert artists of the emergent generation found themselves perturbed by similar intimations. Although no one could have predicted when such a war would break out, let alone foreseen the prolonged and harrowing course it took, painters of very different persuasions were united in a growing conviction that the world might soon be threatened by awesome devastation.⁷¹

Kandinsky rarely strayed from his abstract oeuvre between 1911 and 1914 and therefore never depicted the early stages of the war representationally. Instead, he focused on letting his spirituality guide him in creating compositions. During the years before the war, Kandinsky's works were informed by his studies in Vologda of pagan religions, his knowledge of Theosophy and the ideas of enlightenment as well as by his frustrations towards the country he resided in. He began to create abstract paintings that contained a code of colors. The artist felt an intense connection between colors, shapes and spirituality; his research resulted in the books, *On the Spiritual in Art* (1910) and *Point and Line to Plane* (1926).

⁷⁰ Izenberg, Gerald N. . "Intellectual-Cultural History and Psychobiography: The Case of Kandinsky." *Annual of Psychoanalysis*. 31. (2003): 31.

⁷¹ Cork 13.

Although conscious of his color theories and the effects they have on a viewer, Kandinsky sometimes let his emotions take over to release his feelings on the canvas. Cork explains one such case when discussing the cannons in *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)*:

Kandinsky was anxious to stress that “I did not intend to give a representation of war; to do so would have required different pictorial means.” But he had no desire to underestimate the powerful psychological forces which had driven him, probably against his prior expectations, to paint this prophetic canvas. He explained to Eddy [a Chicago collector] that *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)* was a “picture which I have painted rather subconsciously in a state of strong inner tension. So intensively did I feel the necessity of some of the forms that I remember having given loud-voiced directions to myself, as for instance, ‘But the corners must be heavy!’”⁷²

Although almost all of Kandinsky’s paintings at this time conjure destruction or paradise (and sometimes both), three paintings during this pre-war period demonstrate his feelings more abstractly. These are *Angel of the Last Judgment* from 1911, *Black Spot* from 1912, and *Improvisation (Deluge)* from 1913.

Angel of the Last Judgment

Kandinsky painted *Angel of the Last Judgment* in 1911 (Figure 7) shortly after he finished his first abstract painting. The name of this painting in addition to the interpretations of the colors and lines (based on Kandinsky’s own analysis of color and form) represent a world declining into an apocalyptic abyss.

The dominant lines in *Angel of the Last Judgment* are arches; one black smudged arch juts out from the bottom left corner while a few more black and yellow curved lines dance around the top of the painting. The bottom arch extends to the center with four harsh claw-like blue stripes protruding from its apex. The interior of this arch holds splashes of blue, dark blue, red, white, orange, and green with only a slight mixing of adjacent colors. Outside the arch, on

⁷² Cork 18.

the right, is a mixture of reds, pinks, light blues, and oranges. An off-white shape with roughly scalloped edges also sits next to the arch. The top half of the composition is more chaotic than the bottom. Kandinsky used darker, richer colors and sharp, defined edges on the black streaks of the top arches. An intense red is the dominating color followed by a sumptuous yellow. There are also greens, blues, and a spot of brown. He used quick, small hash marks (usually in yellow and primarily in the top half) to unite neighboring patches of color.

Kandinsky used his colors and forms to speak of harmony, antithesis, and movement, expressed through the psychological impact of colors and shapes. He used specific color combinations that “represented the psyche in strife,”⁷³ such as black and white or dark and light. He included many spots of white in *Angel of the Last Judgment* but the most important white comes out of the dark lower arch. The black of the arch gives way to the white on the right, and although the white is bound by a thin gray line, its swirling power, conveyed by Kandinsky’s expressive brushstrokes, begs to be let loose. This and all other whites are a symbol of rebirth, of a new and clean beginning. Despite the intensity and hostility of the yellows, the white offers a serenity and refuge from the madness. The deep blue under the lower arch also creates a place for relaxation and contemplation for the viewer, in harmony with the white. The blue is a place to find peace in spirituality. Black, on the other hand, represents death or an eternal stillness.⁷⁴ Because of the supremacy of yellow in this painting, it is appropriate to discuss this color in detail. The most intense yellow occurs in a triangle near the middle of the composition. The combination of the long, sharp triangle and the harsh yellow creates a strong and emphasized section of the picture.⁷⁵ The other yellows that comprise the rest of the painting, although not

⁷³ Izenberg. “Origins of Abstraction.” 163-164.

⁷⁴ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 68.

⁷⁵ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 46.

charged with as much energy, play an important role in describing the authority of color.

Kandinsky wrote:

Yellow, in any geometric form, if gazed at steadily, disturbs its observer, hurts him but also stimulates him. It displays all the characteristics of power expressed by a color which finally carries an aggressive and insistent effect to the mind. This quality of yellow, which has a great inclination towards lighter colors, can be brought to a power and height unbearable to the eye and to the mind. When so intensified, it sounds like a shrill horn, blown constantly louder, or a high pitched flourish of trumpets.⁷⁶

The yellow in this painting is very intense and dominates the scene despite the presence of deep blues and dark, powerful black streaks. Kandinsky goes on to say that yellow,

when compared with the frame of mind of some individual, it would be capable of the color representation of madness – not melancholy or hypochondriacal mania but rather an attack of violent, raving lunacy.⁷⁷

His description and use of yellow evokes the psychological madness of war.

In addition to describing a color's evocation of emotions and spirituality, Kandinsky also related shapes and lines to specific characteristics in his book, *Point and Line to Plane*. In *Angel of the Last Judgment*, he did not use any completely horizontal or vertical lines. These kinds of lines carry less tension in the composition than a diagonal, and by using many diagonals, some more visible than others, he created a considerable amount of tension. In addition, the arches have built up tension associated with sideways pressure.⁷⁸ The top arches have a closer resemblance to a straight line than the bottom arch which makes them less strained than the bottom. The forceful aggressiveness of the bottom arch sets the tone for the whole painting.

Kandinsky included references to Theosophy in this painting that can be explained through Nietzsche's point of view. Cork claims that Nietzsche

Did not view this 'dark cloud that hangs over mankind' as a baleful threat. The storm which generated the lightning would be an emetic, purging Europe of its

⁷⁶ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 63.

⁷⁷ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 64.

⁷⁸ Kandinsky, Wassily. *Point and Line to Plane*. 2nd ed. Munich: 1928. 79.

pervasive rottenness and heralding the vitalistic new order he cherished. If the entire continent were engulfed by the impending cataclysm, so much the better: the renovation of society would be still more widespread and effective.⁷⁹

His opinion illustrates Theosophy's dogma of an apocalypse that would cleanse the world and offer a chance for rebirth. *Angel of the Last Judgment* contains many circular or semi-circular shapes that represent reincarnation and the cycle of life and death. In addition, the white and black near the bottom clash and battle for space. Black can be related to the abyss while white has the pure, bright qualities of regeneration. Theosophy's emphasis on the idea of an apocalypse is also apparent in the title of this painting. The Last Judgment is an apocalyptic event. The screaming yellows and dreadful blacks in the composition reference madness and death whether Kandinsky intended the painting to be a representation of a biblical Judgment Day or an impending war.

Although Zyrian folk art did not focus on Christian imagery such as an apocalypse, Kandinsky derived symbols from their culture and relates them to a catastrophic war. He used arches similar to those at the top of the painting to represent a horse and rider. This symbol placed in this composition can come to stand for a rider of the apocalypse. Kandinsky painted several versions of the Last Judgment and apocalypse themes in the following years including *The Last Judgment* from 1912 and *Rider of the Apocalypse* from 1911 which shows two swirling warriors with weapons drawn riding horses above a small city. Kandinsky filled *Angel of the Last Judgment* with ideas of the apocalypse through Theosophical and Zyrian imagery. This apocalyptic theme foreshadows the coming war that could be sensed through Germany's volatile involvement around Europe and Africa.

⁷⁹ Cork 26.

Black Spot

Black Spot (Figure 8) from 1912 has a lighter color palette than *Angel of the Last Judgment* but Kandinsky continued themes from the earlier painting. Some colors and shapes, however, have changed significantly. *Black Spot* leaves the viewer confused with conflicting ideas of death and hope.

Kandinsky kept the arch motif from *Angel of the Last Judgment* for this painting. Situated in the same place, coming from the bottom left corner, the black arch reaches towards the center of the painting. Thin black lines move diagonally and horizontally and cut through the arch. A triangle appears under the arch, divided into segments, each with a variation of yellow inside. An array of black lines and brown and blue streaks of color take up the upper left half of the painting while flowing black lines with short strokes occupy the bottom right. The background is a combination of washed out blues, yellows, reds, black, and white. The focus of the painting is in the center – a large, black, oblong shape with white streaks radiating from the inside commands attention from the viewer.

Black is the dominant color in *Black Spot*. To Kandinsky, black is the least harmonious color and can sound like an eternal silence. Kandinsky also connected black with memories of trips to Italy when he was three where he was almost separated from his mother, only for her to leave permanently a year later.⁸⁰ Black, for him, also represents loss and emptiness. White is black's symbolic and spiritual opposite. Although Kandinsky also sees white as a silence, "it is not a dead silence but one full of possibilities."⁸¹ As the colors in the background fade to white, they reemerge with the ability to create a new beginning. Blue also appears in this painting quite often. Kandinsky used both a serious, contemplative deep blue and a quiet, more indifferent

⁸⁰ Izenberg. "Origins of Abstraction." 167.

⁸¹ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 68.

light blue.⁸² Both the dark and light blues give a place for the viewer to find peace, away from the tension created by the contrasting black and white areas. Kandinsky included four vivid red spots in the upper center of the painting. Although he claims red has a powerful presence, this red is overwhelmed by the black and white conflict and sinks to the background with the yellows, greens, and other lighter reds.

Kandinsky used the arch again to build tension in the painting. It juts dynamically towards the center. He also included many diagonal lines in various forms and one horizontal line. The horizontal line near the bottom has an “infinite, cold possibility of movement in its most concise form.”⁸³ This line stabilizes the rest of the chaotic painting, though without much luck. The straight diagonals exert immense amounts of energy touching the sides of the paintings, in hopes of escaping the canvas borders. The curved diagonal lines add even more tension as opposing forces create soft and hard zigzags. The most prominent zigzag is in the bottom right, created with acute angles that correspond to the disorder in the rest of the painting. Acute angles are highly active and represent an aspect of thought and vision.⁸⁴ They also relate directly to yellow, adding more madness to the painting. Finally, the black spot is an oval that has been pushed into a curved shape by the unknown forces. This adds to the complexity of the painting as Kandinsky uses more and more conflicting forces throughout the composition.

The artist included other symbols besides black and white in this painting that are derived from folk art depictions of the Last Judgment and Paradise.⁸⁵ He painted three parallel curving lines in the upper left corner to symbolize horses. The horses are pulling a cart away from the

⁸² Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 65.

⁸³ Kandinsky. *Point and Line to Plane*. 58.

⁸⁴ Kandinsky. *Point and Line to Plane*. 72.

⁸⁵ Long. "Occultism, Anarchism, and Abstraction." 42.

center of the composition and away from the destruction.⁸⁶ He developed this horse motif from the shaman drums discussed earlier.

Similar to *Angel of the Last Judgment*, Kandinsky employed conflicting white and black areas to represent opposing Theosophical ideas of rebirth and apocalyptic death. The colors battle each other for attention and leave the viewer wondering which side will win. If the white successfully overpowers the black, there is hope in this world Kandinsky has made. Conversely, the black's victory would mean inevitable destruction. The artist's juxtaposition of the two colors highlights the Theosophical influence: regeneration can only occur after an apocalypse or war. This painting shows the artist's belief that white cannot exist without black and the coming Great War will bring enlightenment to the decaying world. Serpentine lines undulating throughout the composition and small areas of a sickly green heighten the disorientation of the painting and add complexity to the conflicting white and black.⁸⁷

Improvisation (Deluge)

Kandinsky painted *Improvisation (Deluge)* in the year immediately preceding the war (Figure 9). His color palette is considerably darker in this painting than in *Angel of the Last Judgment* from two years earlier. He has also increased the chaos slightly from his earlier paintings by including more and darker areas of blue and black. The overall emotional effect is one of sadness, devastation, and confusion.

Great organic, swirling shapes dominate this painting from 1913. Very deep blues, almost as dark as black, surround the scene and attempt to envelop the majority of the lighter shapes. A massive red oval on the left is the focal point of the painting, primarily because it is

⁸⁶ Long. *The Development of an Abstract Style*. 133.

⁸⁷ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 62.

the largest bright color on the canvas. The red's counterpart on the right, a light blue egg-shape with splashes of red and green, prevails less but still stands out against the dark blue shapes around it. The dark blue winds its way around the scene while lighter mixed blues, greens, and yellows occasionally interrupt the darkness. Kandinsky chose to include a minimal amount of straight lines. The most prominent are the three lines projecting from the red shape diagonally up to the top right. Another sharp line, almost in the form of a lightning bolt, comes close to, but stops short of touching the first three diagonals from the upper left. Three short pink lines on the right balance the other long, skinny lines on the left.

Kandinsky saw his improvisations such as *Deluge* as “intuitive, for the greater part spontaneous expressions of incidents of an inner character, or impressions of the ‘inner nature.’”⁸⁸ Although Kandinsky's spirituality likely influenced all of his abstract paintings since 1911, he made it clear that he composed his *Improvisations* to be very emotional and personal.

As with *Angel of the Last Judgment* and *Black Spot*, Kandinsky used colors and forms to compose a scene representing specific emotions. Warm reds and cool blues fight for the viewer's attention; the red comes forward while the more prevalent blue recedes. The large red shape resembles a heart, complete with arteries and veins and is the life of the painting; it contains energy, warmth, and passion. The rest of the forms and colors dance around the red. Kandinsky used several techniques to give this painting a tremendous amount of movement. While blue and yellow are both lively colors that respectively radiate in and out, green is more stable. Because of the scarcity of green in comparison to red and blue, this painting constantly leads the viewer's eye around the canvas. Kandinsky also used continuously swirling lines and shapes to give the painting flowing movement with very few straight, sharp lines that would alternatively create a pause in the action.

⁸⁸ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 98.

Unlike *Angel of the Last Judgment* and *Black Spot*, *Deluge* has no significantly sharp arches or acute angles. Kandinsky employed the use of diagonal lines to create a tension between the red shape and the top border; the lines almost hold the shape in place and give it strength. The other lines are close to vertical, which signifies warmth (versus a horizontal coolness) that is enhanced by their warm pink hue.⁸⁹ The warm red shape on the left is therefore balanced by the three vertical lines on the right, creating a harmony of forms. This harmony is largely disrupted by the chaos of numerous twisting and bending lines created by the edges of shapes. These lines, similar to the zigzags in *Black Spot*, are made from conflicting forces coming together to distort straight lines. This again creates tension and anxiety within the painting.

Despite blue's role as a receding background color, it has an ominous presence because of its constant movement. It swirls as it schemes a way to take over the red. Blue's swirling movement and association with black disturbs the traditional psychological calmness of blue. Black intensifies the blue's menacing power, forcing out all tranquility. Black, though mixing with the lively blue, acts as the ultimate stillness "like the silence of the body after death, the end of life"⁹⁰ that will ultimately encompass all the forms. The red is the life force and the calming power of the scene but the black and dark blues take its power; the red "can be extinguished by blue, as glowing iron is put out by water,"⁹¹ thus ending the life.

In 1913, Europe is dangerously close to the start of the war and the tensions are high as the fighting threatens to break out in any coming month. The black in *Improvisation (Deluge)* is the impending disaster of war, the death and destruction that is about to take place. Unlike *Angel of the Last Judgment*, Kandinsky did not use any white areas to symbolize hope or rebirth. As

⁸⁹ Kandinsky. *Point and Line to Plane*. 59.

⁹⁰ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 68.

⁹¹ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 69-70.

the war drew closer an end may have seemed more distant; therefore he did not include white as a new beginning because there may not have been one.

In 1908, the philosopher Rudolf Steiner gave a series of lectures in Germany about a Theosophical apocalypse. In his scheme, the world was currently in the fifth of seven epochs. The fourth epoch consisted of a great flood, the fifth would end with a great war, and after the seventh the world would enter into a spiritual realm.⁹² *Deluge*, defined as a great flood, possibly references both the biblical flood and the coming of an apocalyptic war. The blue and black swirling shapes move fluidly throughout the composition giving a sense of water. The black, however, is ominous and forecasts another destructive event in addition to the flood. Kandinsky included a lightning bolt in order to perhaps signify the storm of Judgment Day, indicating an event that has yet to happen but is drawing ever closer. The lightning bolt-like zigzag in the upper left is not only an apocalyptic image but also indicates inspiration from Russian folk art. Stylized lightning bolts were commonly found on *lubki*, the woodblock prints used in Russia until the early 20th century.⁹³ Although not based on Zyrian culture, *lubki* were a form of folk literature with deep roots in Russia.

Kandinsky was subconsciously aware of the coming war, but did not intend to depict it here. A couple years later during the war, a patron asked whether the artist had that intention and predicted the war and he replied “Not this war... but I knew that a terrible struggle was going on in the spiritual sphere, and that made me paint the picture.”⁹⁴ In perhaps an attempt to ground the spiritual painting in reality, Kandinsky included a smudge of brown in the bottom left corner representing dirt and earth. He connected the spiritual realm with the real world, much like in the beliefs of the Zyrians and the Theosophical movement. Kandinsky’s internalized feelings

⁹² Long. *The Development of an Abstract Style*. 28.

⁹³ Long. “The Veiling of Apocalyptic Folk Imagery.” 223.

⁹⁴ Cork 18.

from the increasing tension in Germany prompted his conscious to display his feelings on canvas. The result was the *Deluge*, a horrifying look into the next few years in Europe.

V. CONCLUSION

Before Kandinsky was an artist, he was a law student. Partially because of his interests in ethnography and pagan law and partly due to his curiosity in his father's genealogical background, the artist journeyed to northern Russia to study the Zyrian people. While there, he gained a variety of knowledge from their culture and most importantly learned about pagan spirituality and the art of shaman drums. Although Theosophy would enhance his views on spirituality later, the Zyrian religious system provided a base for Kandinsky to start thinking differently about religion.

The shaman drums had a direct influence on Kandinsky's art. His motifs, including the horse, developed from the shaman's pictographs. He took the idea of abstracting forms and lines from the Zyrians further by relating different types of lines to specific feelings (such as an arch representing heightened tension). Kandinsky also started to recognize colors as evoking emotions. In addition, certain color and form combinations had their own spiritual representation. Yellow in a triangle is sharper and more powerful than yellow in a circle due to the nature of yellow as a color of madness and the triangle as a shape with harsh acute angles. His theories on form and color likely have distant roots in Zyrian culture. The imagery in *Angel of the Last Judgment*, *Black Spot*, and *Improvisation (Deluge)* do not reflect Zyrian beliefs. Instead, Kandinsky created these paintings after years of reflection on spirituality, a key component of their culture.

The artist built on his knowledge of Zyrian spirituality with Theosophy. As a part of the intellectual circles in Russia during the Silver Age, he had the resources to come in contact with the philosophies and ideologies of this movement. Theosophical imagery made its way into the three paintings discussed here as well as many others throughout the artist's life. Some of the most prominent imagery includes the battle between darkness and lightness and numerous circle motifs. Theosophical thought became intimately connected with the war as intellectuals and theosophists in Russia and Germany saw the war as a chance for the broken world to right itself. The theosophists believed the war would cleanse Europe, and regeneration could only happen after suffering and death.⁹⁵ In *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky emphasized the last words in a book by Blavatsky, "in the twenty-first century, earth will be a heaven compared to what it is now," to reinforce his observance and belief in Theosophy's post-apocalyptic renaissance ideology.⁹⁶ This sentiment was not limited to theosophists, however. Kandinsky's former professor, Sergei Bulgakov, a Russian idealist philosopher, saw the war as a chance for Russia to be reborn, but only after suffering. He warned "against the 'dark forces' that are torturing the body of Russia" and called "to 'a free, spiritual act, invisible but entirely real,' to dispel the forces of darkness."⁹⁷ Kandinsky used colors and forms to express these ideas of regeneration. In his paintings, black represents death while white is rebirth. White and black, or dark and light in general, often battle for attention in his pre-war paintings indicating Kandinsky's thoughts of a revival following a war.

Many artists all over Europe, aware of Theosophy or not, experienced the tension of a coming war. Although none knew when it would start or how long it would last, all felt certain

⁹⁵ Carlson 77-79.

⁹⁶ Kandinsky. *On the Spiritual in Art*. 26.

⁹⁷ Carlson 79.

of the threat of devastation.⁹⁸ This was partly due to the writings of philosopher Rudolf Steiner where, by 1910, his “focus on the Apocalypse as the significant document for modern times coincided with the assumption of many Russian intellectuals, intensified by the 1905 revolution, that the Apocalypse was nearing.”⁹⁹ Kandinsky’s residence in Germany in the several years before World War One was also a factor in causing his acknowledgement of the threat. The Germans were wary of the Russians for fear of anarchist uprising and revolution and Germany’s conflicts with other nations strained the government and citizens. With all the conflict, many elite were able to conclude that destruction was inevitable.

Not only was the war inevitable, it was welcomed. Many artists and intellectuals, including Kandinsky and his fellow artist Franz Marc, saw the devastation as an opportunity for Europe to purge itself of materialism and religious defectiveness.¹⁰⁰ For the artists, there were two levels of strife. There was an internal, spiritual struggle for the rejection of materialism as well as a physical struggle in war. At the end of the war, the world would emerge enlightened, focused on spiritual, rather than material, values. Kandinsky believed abstraction was the way to reach the coming utopia rather than through representational painting that equated with materialism.¹⁰¹

With the need to express himself and his thoughts on the crumbling world, but limited by German restrictions on political art, Kandinsky created abstract paintings with underlying significance and the psychology of color and form in mind. He chose every shade, tone, and line carefully in order to convey a narrative. His lines included arches; a common theme that Kandinsky believed had an inherent tension pushing the line into a bent form. He used colors for

⁹⁸ Cork 13.

⁹⁹ Long. "Occultism, Anarchism, and Abstraction." 40.

¹⁰⁰ Stavrinaki 377.

¹⁰¹ Long. "The Veiling of Apocalyptic Folk Imagery." 217.

different effects; his yellows evoke madness, just as black signifies death, green is sickness, and white is hope. When black and white are adjacent it is not only a battle between light and dark for a space on the canvas, but also a conflict between the fear of death and destruction and the hope of a world reborn. The colors and forms in the three paintings discussed are a manifestation of the artist's emotions of the coming war.

Various experiences in his life led the artist to create such abstract but descriptive works. The knowledge from traveling and studying in northern Russia formed a foundation for him to have access to and learn from the increasingly recognized Theosophical doctrine. These, along with his circumstances living in Germany, set the stage for depictions of war in paintings such as *Angel of the Last Judgment*, *Black Spot*, and *Improvisation (Deluge)*. Without his trip to Vologda, Kandinsky may have never started to abstract forms similar in the way the shamans did on their drums. He used a number of these derived folk art images to heighten mystery as well as to strengthen the themes of conflict and hope.¹⁰² Additionally, spirituality played major roles in both Zyrian culture and in Theosophical thought. The pagan religion of the Zyrians emphasized the connectedness of heaven and the earth where the spiritual realm had a direct connection to agriculture.¹⁰³ Similarly, Blavatsky's Theosophy focused on spiritual thoughts such as reincarnation. Nietzsche took Blavatsky's spirituality to a new level by introducing his idea of a super human, or a man that transcends humanity. Kandinsky related to this divine human figure through painting. Colors, specifically, "enabled his transportation beyond empirical reality."¹⁰⁴ He felt he rose beyond consciousness when creating his paintings and his emotions, whether joy or tension, could manifest themselves on the canvas. This process began

¹⁰² Long. "Occultism, Anarchism, and Abstraction." 42.

¹⁰³ Paulson. 152. The Zyrians, however, have since lost their folk belief in heaven because of their small dependence on agriculture due to living at sub polar latitudes and the effective Christianization. Other people in the region still hold on to their early folk beliefs.

¹⁰⁴ McKay. "Kandinsky's ethnography." 203.

to happen after 1911 when he and many other artists began assessing Europe's situation and became convinced of imminent war.

Kandinsky's abstract style evolved from his studies in Russia and his contact with Theosophy up to the Great War. His horse motif is the best example of this progression. He began to create the symbol after viewing shaman drums of the Zyrians and soon he represented a horse and rider with a single curved line. Many years later, when Theosophical thought began to penetrate Europe and Russia, and many philosophers spoke about a coming day of reckoning, Kandinsky's horse motif lent itself to the image of a rider of the apocalypse. His paintings with this motif, whether a highly abstracted curve or a more representational depiction, therefore relate back to folk imagery and Theosophy but also look forward towards a great destruction. Cultural events in the artist's life led to the creation and evolution of this image as well as his use of circles. Kandinsky's circles had roots in Zyrian pictographs representing suns. Theosophical imagery also included circles, although related to reincarnation rather than the sun, which could be attached to adjectives such as bright or light. These Zyrian and Theosophical images melded together in the circle to form a representation of a bright future. Unfortunately, this hope comes only after destruction. Whether it is an oval or a semicircle, Kandinsky used some form of a round shape in all three paintings discussed, relating each to the inevitable war and the rebirth after it.

Kandinsky was not alone in his endeavor to represent destruction before the war. The German expressionist Ludwig Meidner painted many apocalyptic images in the years before the outbreak in 1914. His *Apocalyptic Landscape* from 1913 shows a man lying in the midst of storms, flooding, fire, and smoke, in a world not far off from the reality of the coming war. Franz Marc also painted devastation after realizing the paradise motif he had created could not

last. In *The Fate of the Animals* from 1913 trees and animals endure a terrible storm of thrashing lines. The only hope is in the pair of animals in the bottom left corner where “the affection with which they nuzzle each other implies a readiness to propagate the new race of pure beings in the future.”¹⁰⁵ Aware of the approaching destruction, Marc hoped for a world that can be rebuilt.

Through his pre-war paintings, Kandinsky acknowledged the coming war. His use of manic yellows and deadly blacks, that foreshadow the incredible death and destruction Europe will witness, are contrasted by life-giving reds and pure whites that express a hopeful future. The paintings show Kandinsky’s belief in an apocalypse that will both destroy the materialism that plagues the world and lift society into a spiritual realm. He understood, as cultural historian Carol McKay states,

That inner transformation of the individual, through art and culture, was a necessary prerequisite for real social change. No longer regarding art as 'an extravagance' for a Russian, he granted artists immense moral duties, arguing that they could generate the necessary creative energies for establishing a new, spiritualised community of all humankind.¹⁰⁶

In order for the world to start to cleanse itself of materialism, Kandinsky believed individuals had to reach spiritual enlightenment and art provided a vehicle to get there. His abstract paintings from 1911 until the start of the war in 1914 were a step in the direction of striving for spirituality for all of society. None of the artists or intellectuals could have predicted the aftermath of the war, but some, like Kandinsky, hoped for paradise.

¹⁰⁵ Cork 13-27.

¹⁰⁶ McKay, Carol. "Modernist Primitivism?" 33.

VI. FULL PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 6: Kandinsky. *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 109.2x109.9cm.

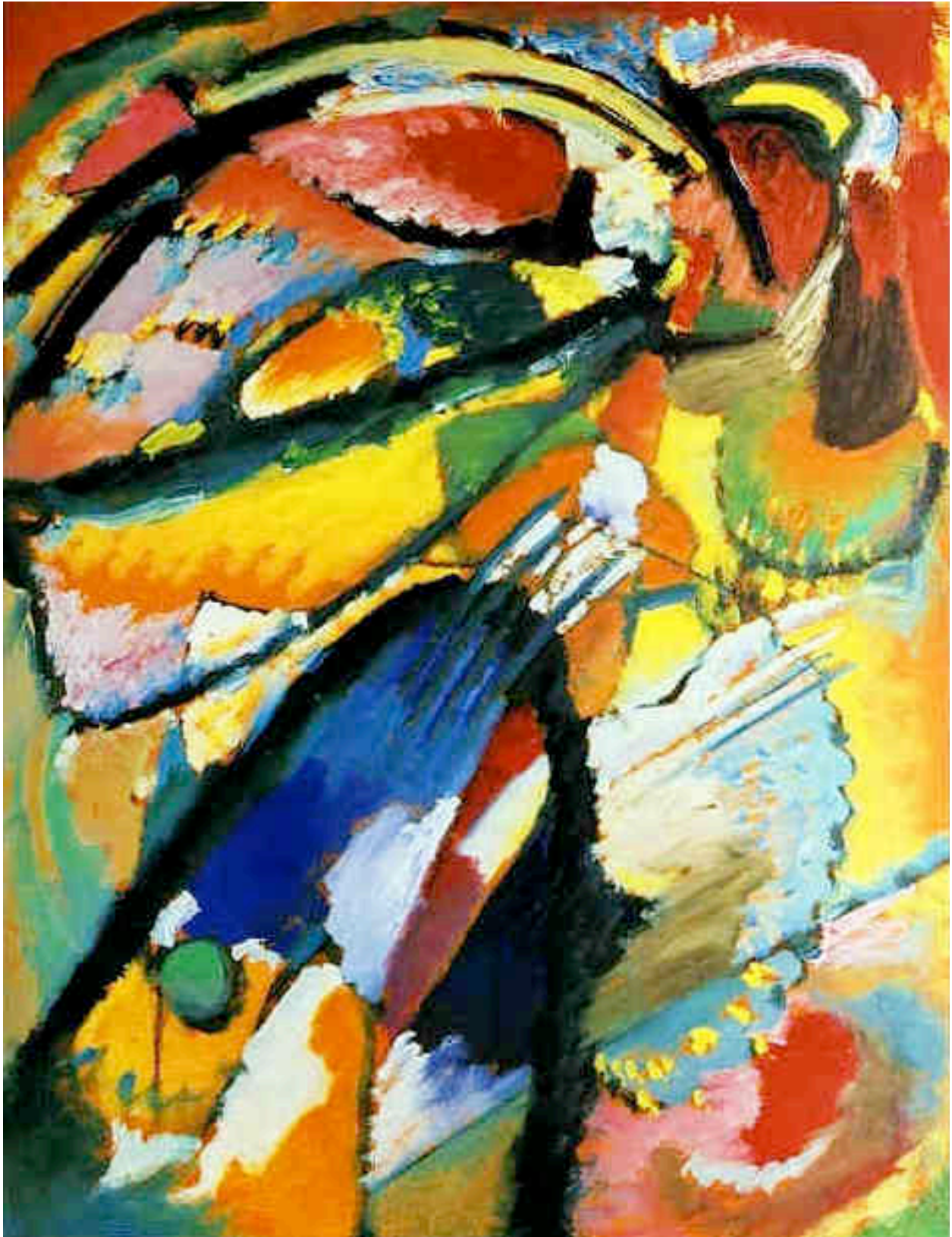


Figure 7: Kandinsky. *Angel of the Last Judgment*, 1911. Oil on cardboard, 64x50 cm.



Figure 8: Kandinsky. *Black Spot*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 100x130 cm.



Figure 9: Kandinsky. *Improvisation (Deluge)*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 95x150 cm.

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